

PROVINCE HOUSE

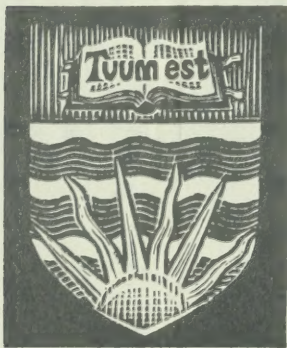
A. MacMechan

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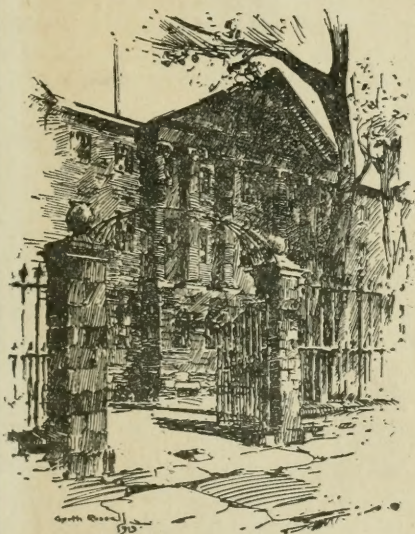


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Province House

By A. MacMechan



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Province House

More than a hundred years ago the proud little colony of Ultima Thule determined to house in a worthy fashion its law-makers and its courts of law. This palace of justice took eight years to build and it cost much money, but the result is a stately monument to the pride and taste of our ancestors. It stands in the middle of the Lower Parade, on the historic site of old Government House. Short's drawing of 1759 shows this abode of the royal governors for half a century, standing on a low terrace with a small cannon at each corner, and the original British Grenadier, complete with sugar-loaf cap and sentry-box mounting guard at the eastern door. After a century, Province House stands like the rock on which its foundations rest. It has not settled one millimetre.

Mystery shrouds the identity of the architect. Tradition will have it that he was John Merrick, Master Painter in the Dock Yard; but how a master painter in Nelson's time should be almost an iner-

rant architect is not vouchsafed. "The Acadian Magazine" of 1826 gives the honor explicitly to Richard Scott, Esquire. Whoever he was, he achieved a masterpiece. The mass and solidity of the fabric resting on piers and arches which Roman masons might have reared, the regularity of the ashlar, the Ionic columns supporting Grecian pediments, empty niches in the grey walls of hewn Ramsheg stone all tell the one story. Within doors, the tale is taken up and carried on by balustrades, cornices, mantels, fanlights, fire-places, panelled mahogany doors. Without and within, Province House is impressed with the classic dignity, the subtle charm deriving from the genius of the brothers Adam.

The hand of the Philistine has been stretched out upon Province House with lamentable results, but some portions have so far escaped the spoiler. The Council Chamber, where our House of Lords deliberate, is still much as it was a century ago. It is a high-vaulted, stately room, rich in gesso work and Adam stucco. The doorway which gives admittance from the hall would not disgrace a

European palace. Tall windows, east, south and west flood the Council Chamber with light. At the western end is a dais surmounted by the Royal Arms, and before it the table of the Clerks. Negligently disposed round about are the thirty black horsehair thrones whereon repose our superior legislative wisdom.

A wide gangway and heavy balustrades bound the eastern half of the room. To this open, chairless pen may be admitted on sufferance His Majesty's lieges, the common people to witness, at a respectful distance, the mystery of making laws. On a certain winter's day in 1842, Charles Dickens beheld the ceremony of Opening the House, and declared it was like seeing Westminster through the wrong end of the telescope. Our Senate of Lilliput!

The Council Chamber is the Valhalla and Westminster Abbey of Ultima Thule, for here are the memorials of our great men. Here hangs the portrait of Williams, who conducted the classic defence of Kars in the Crimean War. Here is Jack Inglis of the Rifle Brigade who made good the frail earthworks of the

Residency at Lucknow through the long siege of the Sepoys. Here is the native humorist who created Sam Slick. Canvases of ancient date put the enlarged photographs to the blush. George the Second and George the Third, father and son, with their resplendent queens, gleam regally from the walls.

In the ante-chamber is a relic of the city founding. It is a long low oaken table of ancient make and joined as solidly as Province House itself. It is the cabin-table of the "Beaufort" transport, which, with twelve other vessels, bore the floating city of Dolcefear across the Atlantic in the wonderful summer season of 1749. Before the first rude Government House could be thrown together on the Lower Parade, the Honourable Edward Cornwallis, Fundator Noster, met with his Council around this board. Akins the historian painted the group—that fine old Huguenot, Mascarene, dissipated John Salusbury, father of Sam Johnson's friend, Mrs. Thrale, poor Captain Edward Howe who was barbarously murdered at Beaubassin, John Gorham of the Rangers, and Benjamin Green the Clerk.

Across the hallway is the quaint old Legislative Library. Tall Palladian windows light the crowded alcoves, the twisted stairs leading to the gallery, the heavy tables, chairs and showcases. The atmosphere is wholly of the ancient world of leisure, with no intrusion of the modern. Here also are portraits of our Great Ones—the city merchant who founded the most famous fleet of steamships, the Debussy portrait of our Tribune of the Plebs, Dr. Matthias Hoffmann painted by Hoppner, Malachy Salter and Dorothy his wife (ascribed to Copley) and Prince Edward himself, young and slim and soldierly, in the uniform of the Seventh Fusiliers, as when he commanded the forces of Dolcefar.

Before the Court House was built, this was the court room. The present ceiling is modern; the walls originally were carried to the upper story. There was once a gallery at the northern end. The Judges' bench was at the southern end, with the robing room behind. Memorable scenes have been enacted here. On Wednesday, July 28th, 1819, handsome Richard John Uniacke, the younger, was tried for his

life. Exactly a week before, he had shot and killed William Bowie in a duel. Bowie had taken umbrage at something Uniacke said in the course of a trial in which he was interested. A challenge was sent and a meeting followed at the Governor's Farm. The first exchange of shots was harmless. Uniacke's fire-eating second insisted on loading the pistols again; and this time Bowie fell mortally wounded. Aunt Susan Etter remembered the seconds coming to her father's house early in the morning for pillows to put in the carriage conveying the wounded man back to town. Uniacke came into the court-room leaning on the arm of his father, the Attorney-General, an old giant in a snuff-colored suit, carrying his seven-foot staff. In a pathetic and polite speech, he handed his son over to justice. But those were the days of the code; no gentleman was held accountable for the consequences of an affair of honor. Uniacke was acquitted.

March 1, 1835, is another memorable date in the annals of Province House. This area was packed, for Joseph Howe, the young editor of "The Novascotian," was on trial for a crime. On New Year's

Day, his paper contained a letter attacking the junta of wealthy merchants who, as a Commission of the Peace, mismanaged the affairs of the city: It accused them roundly of pocketing the taxes for years. They took measures to stop the mouth of this insolent journalist, by having him indicted for criminal libel. No lawyer would take the hopeless case for the defence and Howe had to rely on his own mother wit. He was forced to plead his own cause, and he ran great risks. For a similar attack upon the magistrates, fifteen years before, young Mr. Wilkie had been indicted for criminal libel, tried, found guilty and sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labor. He was driven from the city, a ruined man. On that March day, Howe ran almost as great a risk as when he faced John C. Haliburton's loaded pistol at sixteen paces in Point Pleasant Park five years later. But on this day Howe discovered and revealed a power he did not know that he possessed—the power of the tongue, facundia, native eloquence. For six hours and a half he addressed the twelve good men and true in his defence. He showed himself a master of argument, of humor, of irony,

of invective, of pathos. Before he ended, tears were running down one aged juror's cheeks. The jury deliberated for ten minutes and brought in a verdict of "Not guilty." The crowd carried Howe out of Province House, shoulder high. It was a famous victory.

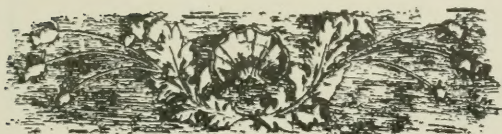
In July, 1844, the majesty of the law was displayed in this room as never before. Beside the full bench of judges sat officers of the Army and Navy in all the glory of red, and blue, and gold. They had been convened by a special commission, in accordance with an ancient law of England. They were to judge of crimes committed on the high seas, far away from Ultima Thule, but the criminals had been taken within the bounds of the colony. Six sailors were to be tried for piracy and murder, and here, within these precincts, the tale of the sordid crimes on board the barque "Saladin" was unravelled by process of law. Four were taken hence to the place of execution, and hanged by the neck until they were dead.

Kings of England have been entertained within these walls, and here lay in state the body of that Canadian prime minister

who fell dead in Windsor Castle. The Council Chamber was then smothered in flowers. History has set its patina upon old Province House.

When it was formally opened for the General Assembly on February 11th, 1819, the Governor, Lord Dalhousie, congratulated the legislature on occupying "this splendid building," and he further declared, "It stands, and will stand, I hope, to the latest posterity, a proud record of the public spirit of this period of our history."

Esto perpetua!



Adam stucco detail, Province House

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